



The Wonder of (washable)

'Loose Parts' !

As everyone prepares nervously for the return of our youngest children to school from the 1st of June, there are many decisions, questions and changes needing to be made. One of those questions is 'what will the children be able to play with and how will we be able to keep it all clean?' With that, the realisation dawns that it's time to pack away (temporarily we hope) many of our most loved resources.

Under the recent Government guidance, such resources that cannot be 'easily cleaned' will need to be 'removed' from our settings (hopefully not for too long!). So, we're now all thinking that this means children's imaginative play will stop. Wrong! All it means is that we have to think outside of the box (the plastic, washable box of course!). We need to take a look at our resources in our settings and rethink their purpose.

It seems, if sad, that we must for the time being put away the playdough, clay, messy exploration and anything you think your lovely ones might put in their mouths. So that's the tea sets, play food and plastic straws gone for now too.

So, what about 'loose parts'? Which we know play such a valuable role in children's learning. Loose parts, such as wood chips, pine cones, sticks and pebbles (to name but a few), spark children's imagination and allows them the freedom to create props and resources of their very own to support their play. Do we have to 'say no' to this wonderfully open-ended, challenging and creative resource? Well yes and no.

At this moment you need to pack away all those lovely baskets of natural 'bits and bobs' you have been collecting for years. It's pretty much impossible to hygienically clean a pinecone! Its also time to store all those tiny 'loose parts' such as nuts, bolts, little wooden pieces and fabric too.

So, is that the end of 'loose parts play' for now? No! So, what can we use as a safe 'loose part' right now? Well, anything you can wash easily!

Lets begin with the resources you'll probably already have in your school/setting, namely 'plastic construction'. By this we mean Duplo, Lego, Mobilo, Mega-Blocks, plastic marble runs, Polydron, K-nex and similar. These can all be used as a 'loose part'. Just consider how you present them. You could, for example, provide a collection of mixed construction pieces. This in itself will provide a greater challenge for the children and allow them to be more creative.

Other things you may already have that can be easily washed and could make great 'loose parts' are - cotton reels, rulers, magnifying glasses, tens and units, peg boards, empty paint palettes/pots, maths shapes, game pieces, small world figures, compare bears ... the list is endless! Go and look in your DT, Maths and Science cupboards! Or that shed that has been storing all of your 'plastic' over the past few years.

Other washable loose parts could include plastic junk such as bottle tops, plastic bottle lids, plastic containers, plastic pegs, plastic trays, plastic reels and tubes or anything that is safe and easily washable.

The great outdoors is no doubt going to be the classroom of choice over the coming weeks, not least because we have been told the virus is less likely to be passed on outside. Plus, we have never needed fresh air more, that's for sure! On top of all this, we know the positive impact being outside has on all of our mental health, both young and old. Something we will all have to pay far greater attention to over the coming weeks, months and years.

Can 'loose parts' play continue outdoors? Of course! Just think bigger! Its time to raid your P.E shed! Look out for plastic cones and markers,

ladders, rackets, hula-hoops, plastic skipping ropes, guttering and ball-pool balls. These will all be great to use on your field or playground.

The questions we need to ask of all these 'loose parts' right now are:

1. Can I wash these items effectively, hygienically and easily?
2. Do they encourage children to put them in their mouths (e.g cups/straws etc)?
3. Will the items dry well?
4. Is it manageable?
5. How much is enough/too much?

You will also need to consider how you will present the 'loose parts' to the children. There's lots of ways you can do this.

You may want to consider putting a selection of 'loose parts' in smaller, individual boxes for children. This will reassure you that just one child is coming in contact with these resources.

If you decide to offer a selection of 'loose parts' to a group of children you may want to spread the resources across the middle of the floor and ask the children to be creative around the edge, therefore minimising close-contact. Remember, the more resources on offer to the children, the more you will have to wash.

There are lots of ways of approaching this play, in these strangest of times. You need to find a way that works for you and your children.

How will I keep them clean and safe ?

You will need to wash them regularly, after every session of play –

- Many people wash their Duplo and Lego in the washing machine by placing them in a pillow case or mesh bag first. This must be done on a cold and gentle cycle. You will need to check your manufacturer's instructions first.
- One of the easiest ways to wash large numbers of plastic bricks and toys is in the plastic box you store them in. Fill the box with warm, soapy detergent (but not too bubbly). You could also add white vinegar for additional sanitising properties. By using these safe liquids you can get the children involved in the cleaning process too! Once they have been swished around and agitated, you could leave them to soak for a short while. Then scoop them out and lay them out on a large towel or blanket outside. Weather permitting, they'll be dry in no time. Clean and sanitise the box and 'voila' you're good to go again!

The other way to clean these items is to sterilise them. This can be done with Milton (other brands available).

The Milton Method (cold water method)

- Requires Milton (or other brand) sterilising tablets or fluid with a plastic container + tap water
- Sterilises in 15 minutes
- The active ingredient is the same used to make water safe for drinking
- Clinically proven to kill 99.9% of germs including bacteria, fungi and viruses
- Contents can stay sterile in the solution for 24 hours
- The Solution lasts for 24 hours so you can use it again and again
- No need to rinse

Undoubtedly, the next few weeks will be strange, worrying at times and so very different from what we are all used to! However, Early Years staff are probably the most used to change and creativity being an everyday part of their school day. Therefore, with a little adaptation, we can help our 'little wonders' through the next few weeks, support them as they get used to new routines and a 'new normal' and they, in turn, will undoubtedly help us to do the same.

Now go and find that P.E shed key!

